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Salute to Colony on her one hundredth birthday--honoring a favorite daughter

The Lady In Robes: Colony's Yvonne Kauger

By Mary Beth Christensen

Some people might think that being born in a small town is a handicap, and that being born a woman in a small town is a double handicap.

However, sometimes it's those values you learn in your youth that push you over the top.

"I started life as a cotton pickin' cotton picker," Yvonne Kauger says. "Then I drove tractors. I decided there had to be something else."

"There's a lot of people who come from small towns who become successful," she notes.

Yvonne Kauger is a prime example of a small-town woman who has become successful. On March 22, 1984, she officially took office as a justice in the Supreme Court of Oklahoma. She's the third woman in Oklahoma to serve the court and certainly the first woman from Western Oklahoma to aspire to such heights.

Ms. Kauger found the road to success long in some ways, but certainly worth the perseverance it took to get there. Perhaps the values she learned as a schoolgirl in Colony helped her overcome the obstacles on her road to success. "In Colony, basketball was King," she remembers. "It wasn't 'life in the fast track' for sure, but I wouldn't take anything for it. You have to learn in life a few elbows are going to be thrown. You do have to compete. Team sports really teach you that."

Because she looks so comfortable in her office in the Oklahoma State Capitol Building, it's hard to imagine this lady of position fighting it out on the basketball court in small-town America so many years ago.

"I feel a little bit like a suffragette," Kauger admits. "You're not alone in this world. You get along with help from everyone you know. Teamwork is a universal concept."



Yvonne Kauger

Yvonne Kauger graduated from Colony High School in 1955, valedictorian in a class of seven students. She was active in basketball and received the Betty Crocker Homemaker Award. She was well known and respected in her hometown, an affection that seems to be mutual: "They (the people in Colony) have loved me all my life and I love them. They're tickled to death about my success."

After graduation, she took what she had learned from Riley Tippens, her high-school basketball coach, and entered a broader competition. "He taught me that life is 90 percent a head game," she recalls. Kauger's next stop was Southwestern Oklahoma State University (then Southwestern State College) at Weatherford, where she majored in Biology and minored in Chemistry, English, and Home Economics. She graduated in just three years. The friends she made there--Wayne Salisbury, Kay and Al Terrill, and Jim Archer--she lists among the best parts of the experience.

From college, Yvonne Kauger went to St. Anthony Hospital in Oklahoma City for her Medical Technician intern-

ship. Her days were filled with laboratory testing, blood testing, and analyzing all types of body fluids and tissues.

In 1965 she entered the Oklahoma City University Night Law School in "the old barracks." She graduated first in her class.

"We were called the 'petticoat class,'" she explains proudly. "The deans were so pleased. They had admitted thirteen women." And upon their graduation four years later, the top three "men" in Kauger's class were women.

With diploma in hand, Yvonne went to work as an associate for Rogers, Travis, and Jordan law firm. Calling her employment there "a wonderful experience," she notes what she learned from each member of the firm. From Clela John Rogers: "You have to care and show humanity to your clients. A firm handshake and a big smile go a long ways in the practice of law and in life in general." From A. Bob Jordan: "I learned to do a workmanlike job in a workmanlike manner. His standards were extremely high."

When Justice Hodges asked her to work for him, Yvonne began an association that would last for twelve years. For Justice Hodges she "did research and wrote opinions for his blessing, editing, or total revision." For three years she was in a private law practice, and it was here that she realized "what I really wanted was to be in the Supreme Court."

It happened in 1984. With the encouragement and blessing of her friends and business associates, Yvonne Kauger submitted her application to a judicial nominating committee comprised of six lawyers, six laymen, and one swing member. They then submitted three names to Governor George Nigh, who selected the new justice.

She found out that she had been

appointed on March 14, 1984, when a phone call from Governor Nigh confirmed the appointment. "I really felt like I was on a tightrope," Justice Kauger admits. After the Governor informed her of her new appointment as a Supreme Court Justice, she thanked him, promising, "I'll do my best."

The Governor responded, "I'm sure you will, or I wouldn't have appointed you."

Now, months after taking office, and comfortably ensconced in the State Capitol, Yvonne Kauger is happy. "I'm just reveling in all this," she declares. "I take work home every night. It's kind of like plowing from seven to seven. But that's what it's going to take to even approach doing the job I want to do. It's a goal certainly--a dream realized."

Her days are now filled with the work of this dream-come-true. The

Oklahoma Supreme Court is a court of last resort for all civil matters. Since Oklahoma has a two-court system, Justice Kauger isn't required to deal with criminal cases.

She might feel a bit like a suffragette, sitting on the bench with the men, but she's up to the challenge. "I knew how to do most of it before," she says. "And now I have the vote."

How have the other justices accepted her? Wonderfully, she claims.

Besides her career on the bench, Yvonne Kauger leads a full life. She is married to Ned Bastow, a lawyer; and her daughter, Jonna Kauger Kirchner, recently graduated from Dartmouth and began law school at Boston College.

Yvonne and Ned have built a "cave home" in Colony on a bluff overlooking Seger Indian Valley, a home for the small-town girl that lives in her heart. It comes complete with a moving

sculpture in the front yard--a windmill.

She lives daily by the rules she learned in her hometown and from her parents, John and Alice Kauger of Colony. A favorite Bible verse comes from Luke: "Things which are impossible with man are possible with God."

"We don't always get to choose our time," she notes. "But once I decided to reach my goals, I prepared like a team player. You may not win this one; but regardless of the outcome, you have to get out there and play the game."

Yvonne Kauger, who also founded the Gallery of the Plains Indians in Colony (demonstrating how even the busiest people can still find time to devote to causes they love), is always looking ahead. "It's not too soon to be looking at that Federal Court," she quips with a grin of confidence. ●

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